



The Health of Refugees from Iraq

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4.7 million Iraqis have fled their homes in recent years due to war, violence and instability within their borders. Escape from violence and persecution has caused hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to seek refuge outside Iraq. Violence due to extremism has created schisms in mixed Sunni-Shi'i regions, while non-Muslim minorities continue to be vulnerable to religious and ethnic persecution. Along with the millions fleeing Iraq, currently over 1.3 million people are internally displaced. As of 2011, there are approximately 1.7 million Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers. Repatriation for refugees is often not

a safe or viable option, even when violence subsides and stability returns. Of those who have returned to Iraq, many find their homes and property occupied, thus suffering secondary displacement. Exhausted resources in neighboring countries of asylum have left a massive number of Iraqi refugees vulnerable and in need of safe refuge elsewhere. Approximately 58,000 Iraqi refugees have been resettled in the United States since 2007.

Primary Causes of Iraqi Refugees' Health Concerns

- A devastated medical infrastructure as a result of the Iran-Iraq war, the Gulf War, and the 2003 U.S. Invasion. As of 2008, only an estimated 10-15% of Iraq's medical needs are currently being met.
- Greatly decreased capacity of the health system. As of 2006, more than 2,000 physicians had been killed and over 18,000 had fled the country.
- Resulting mental health conditions following traumatic acts of violence or kidnappings. A 2007 UNHCR survey of Iraqi refugees displaced into Syria, indicated every respondent reported experiencing some form of trauma.
- Maternal and child malnutrition. According to The Ministry of Health in Iraq, more than half of Iraqi children and women suffer from malnutrition and anemia, leading to many serious health conditions and high maternal and infant mortality.
- High rates of amputations and paralysis for many victims of war, particularly for those internally displaced.

Health Problems as Iraqis Transition to America

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Iraq boasted some of the best medical care and top doctors in the region. Since much of the health care system was government-owned, Iraqis have enjoyed quality medical care at little or no cost. The shock of navigating the U.S. health care system is very difficult for them. In addition to being victims of trauma, many of the refugees resettling in the United States come from higher socio-economic backgrounds, might be separated from their families, and often find the transitions of learning a new culture very stressful. Hence, susceptibility to mental health issues is high. Diets have also contributed to vulnerability to chronic diseases, such as hypertension and diabetes. Supporting Iraqi refugees to find affordable and familiar Halal foods helps to ensure proper nutrition. Iraqi refugees often have difficulty finding health care that provides the cultural sensitivity and dignity that they deserve.

Sources

UNHCR: www.unhcr.org

USCIS: www.uscis.gov

Cultural Resource Center: www.cal.org



MAJOR HEALTH ISSUES EXPERIENCED BY IRAQI REFUGEES

- Meningitis
- Respiratory Infections
- Diabetes
- Tuberculosis
- Ischemic Heart Disease
- Diarrheal Diseases
- Perinatal Conditions
- Cerebrovascular Disease
- Parasitic Diseases
- Anemia
- Congenital Disorders
- Mental Health Disorders (particularly depression and PTSD)
- Typhoid (in rural areas)
- Hypertension

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